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**'To See What the End Will BE'  
A Response to *Stony the Road We Trod:*  
*African American Biblical Interpretation***

Having been familiar with the process which led to the production of this volume, it is difficult to contain the excitement. I remember when Thomas Hoyt, John Waters and Randall Bailey were gathering names of African American Biblical Scholars. At that time, I did not know what the end would be; perhaps they did not know either.

Appropriately entitled, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, the book has arrived, and not a day too soon. The biblical (chastening) rod has indeed been bitter. Struck down on every side, we were. We were brow beaten, brainwashed. We were whipped with selected scriptural passages taken out of context. We were crucified by distorted biblical interpretations. Who would have thought that we would ever rise again?

Carefully selected passages were intended to keep us focused upon our proper place in the church and society. More specifically, they were to insure that our self image was of such that we would not even count ourselves as one among the human race. Consequently, we would see ourselves as chattel, put on earth to service our earthly masters as directed (supposedly) by the divine and supreme masters in heaven.

*Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, represents a new era in biblical scholarship. Standing on the shoulders of persons as our yet living forefather, Charles Copher, whose work also appears in this volume, we've reached new levels in our constructive theological work.

I was most appreciative of the process used in the creation of *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. The dialogical, testimonial, group work demonstrated the kind of

communal approach which some of us have claimed, not only as a preferable, but as a part of a more adequate methodology for theological discussions and interpretations, out of which theological norms may arise.

The book represents a major shift—a paradigm shift—wherein the eurocentrism of the scholarship in the dominant culture has been taken off its scholastic pedestal. This has been replaced by an afrocentrism which accents the experiences of African Americans, and relocates the context in which biblical interpretations are done.

It is not my intention to comment upon all of the chapters in this book, but simply to consider some issues which I deem necessary for further advancements in afrocentric interpretations of religious experience. Thomas Hoyt provides an interesting framework for biblical interpretation. Offering creative imaging and imagination as critical to biblical interpretation from a Black framework, Hoyt rejects the rationalist tradition wherein the emphasis is purely intellect or historical facts that are objectively verifiable. He proposes “imagination”, particularly as used in the Black homiletical tradition. The use of Joseph Johnson, a CME bishop and a biblical scholar, is an excellent one to illustrate his point.

Joseph Johnson was legendary. It was not my fortune to have had a personal experience with Bishop Johnson, but I encountered the legend passed down from his former students. Students would talk about the fact that his teaching and interpretation of scriptures were so magnetic that his New Testament classes would be overflowing, and students would hang in front of the doors extending throughout the hallways to experience this man’s bringing of scriptures to life.

Johnson was able to use the skills he developed as an African American preacher along with those he later learned as a New Testament scholar. The capacity of creative use of the imagina-

tion has been demonstrated by many in the African-American homiletical and literary traditions.

Hoyt is careful, however, not to become obsessed with imagination. He, therefore, acknowledges some of the weaknesses (or at least some reasons to be cautious about this method). He prepares the way for this concern prior to his introduction of this method. While acknowledging the need to understand Black history in order to appreciate the story of the Jews found in the Bible, Hoyt says specifically, "[t]he stories found in the Bible tell us how to look at the black story, what questions to raise, and even when we have found some of the answers." (p.30)

This is where I would suggest that perhaps Hoyt is being a bit too cautious. I would tend to think that it is the Black story that provides the context in which the Bible stories are to be interpreted. The Bible alone does not determine relevancy or usability. The context, the Black story, must have as much centrality as the Jewish story. At least, there must be some give and take-some mutuality, as we consider both stories. Furthermore, Hoyt continues:

Since the stories describe the intended relationship between God and God's creation and between persons, the larger community is judged at every point when human beings are found to be in living conditions and relationships different from those that the story shows God to have intended. (p.30)

The piercing question, raised later (in the book) by John Waters, demonstrates that the story may not always be clear about God's intentions. Cautioning us about the weaknesses of his method, Hoyt says, "[o]ne of the obvious dangers is that a barrage of strange interpretations could result. The church could revert to a kind of subjectivity that would lead to eisegetical

fanaticism." Even though our moral principal tells us that two wrongs do not make a right, haven't we suffered from subjectivity being misrepresented as objectivity in biblical interpretation throughout the biblical scholarship of theologians of the dominant culture? The discussions of Weems and Martin illustrate well this point. Perhaps as we move forward in our constructive work, we need to continue to identify the "eisegetical fanaticism" of traditional theologians in order to keep a check and balance. "Eisegetical fanaticism" is not a peculiar mark of historically theologically disenfranchised peoples seizing power of interpretation; but it has been consistently practiced by those wanting to condone slavery, or those supporting patriarchal structures.

I found William Meyers' article to be quite provocative. His articulation of the hermeneutical dilemmas experienced by the African American student of the Bible brings together the intellectual, the academic and the professional. The issue is not only the eurocentrism as reflected in the contents of teaching, primarily by White professors across this country, in seminaries and universities, but the issue extends to the professional arena. Job security or insecurity often depends upon whether one accepts the normative intellectual framework. It's where the professional, intellectual and the political converge. It demonstrates how in the mind of eurocentric scholars, qualification and competence are intricately linked to perspective.

This is true not only at the level of professionals in departments of religion and in seminaries, but the attitude has been internalized by students in these academic settings--in the classrooms. One African American biblical scholar told of how White students would often seek out White biblical scholars to verify what he was teaching in his classes; others have claimed this experience as their own as well. "If a Black person said it, can it really be true?" is the implication. Further, this demonstrates that

qualification and competence for teaching are associated with the color of the teacher as well as with his/her perspective. It's a dilemma which appears to be insurmountable. Is it possible to be Black and a reputable, acceptable, and recognized scholar at the same time?

This dilemma exists in Black scholarship in general and Black scholars have dealt with this problem in different ways. Martin Kilson, in a 1981 article, discusses three strategies used by black intellectuals in the past. Some black intellectuals chose totally to ignore identity and withdraw from any political activity or commitment on behalf of black people. Some chose the other extreme, total politicization, wherein issues of black identity and politics were considered intrinsic to one's intellectual calling. Still others chose to become the marginal people who divided their intellectual concerns between creative scholarly engagement and political activism.<sup>1</sup>

The question of relevancy and black identity has been debated for some time. Carter G. Woodson back in the 1920's addressed the issue in his classic book *The Mis-education of the Negro*. He suggested that the problem is inherent in the racist educational system itself. He argued that in fact, the problem is that African Americans in the western educational system are actually trained against their community, their heritage. After such training their goal tends to be becoming as much like white people and as little like black people as possible.<sup>2</sup> In scholarly work, this tendency manifests itself in the attempt of Black scholars to escape their Black reality.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Kilson, "Politics and Identity Among Black Intellectuals," *Dissent* (1981), 339-49.

<sup>2</sup>Carter G. Woodson, *Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1969), pp. 5-6.

For Woodson the problem with the American system was (and is) that the normative White experience served as a built-in negation of the Black experience. What is likely to be produced, then, is a black intelligentsia with little or no commitment of the Black community. The afrocentric challenge of the writers of *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* represents a reversal of this situation which Woodson described.

Articulating reading strategies for women which, for the most part, have been short circuited because of our tendency (or the fact that we have been conditioned) to see through men's eyes, Renita Weems challenges women to read the Bible with their eyes open and to hear the Bible with their own ears open. African American Women, in spite of the richness of their experience, have been blinded from reading the gospel. They must be given sight, and they must be empowered to read the gospel anew and through their own eyes.

Clarice Martin calls for consistency in the interpreting of the household codes. Passages regarding the subordination of women must be dealt with as seriously as those condoning slavery. "A true understanding of the mission of the church requires that African Americans embrace a resocialized vision of the liberating character of the new creation of God for humanity in the most comprehensive and inclusive sense." (p. 231)

I am particularly appreciative of the challenges of the womanist contributors. They keep before us the multilayered nature of African-American women's experiences, calling forth multidimensional analysis which helps in broadening the Black perspective. Beginning with the question who was Hagar, John Waters further explores whether there is a basis (in the Sarah/Hagar saga) for re-examining the ethical character of Abraham and God, or the possible ethnic or class bias of Sarah. (p.190) The dynamics between Sarah and Hagar are examined and he explores whether Hagar was in fact servant or slave. Though there is no clarity on

how Hagar came to be in the place she was, sufficient evidence is given to support the argument that Hagar did not come from an inferior tradition.

Water's efforts at demonstrating how the writers have attempted to denigrate Egyptian culture was earlier in the volume encouched in a larger discussion by Randall Bailey as he examined the use of "African" in Old Testament literature. Bailey exposes the de-africanization of the Bible by dominant culture biblical scholars. Of course one could see this as the primary function of Copher's long time work of uncovering the Black presence in the Bible which he treats in his chapter in this volume.

Because of its historical misuse, I am especially appreciative of Bailey's examination of those infamous texts which include the phrase "white as snow." Consistent with the oppressive indoctrination during slavery and post slavery periods, African Americans were given to believe that their only salvation was to be washed as "white as snow." Even today we still sing that because "sin has left such a stain (presumably dark) we must be washed white as snow." It has led me to ask, "even if God could, why would God?" This is a prime example of the "eisegetical fanaticism" of White theologians and leaders in the White church designed to undergird the myth that white is inherently and divinely good and black is evil.

It is this same fanaticism that has resulted in the use of the Philemon-Onesimus master-slave passage to support the dominant/subservient relationships which have existed in the North American context. Lloyd Lewis' interpretation of this Pauline letter--Philemon-- offers fresh insights which may lead to some liberation interpretations of the text.

David Shannon provides an excellent example of how the African American sermon and the literary tradition can be used as a resource for an African American hermeneutic. Double entendre is often used in preaching even today. Certainly Paul Lawrence

Dunbar makes excellent use of double entendre. I would only ask why there is not consistency in the interpretation of Dunbar's (the Preacher's) disclaimers. If the first disclaimer was intended largely "as a device to keep the slave master and any informers off guard," the second disclaimer can be interpreted in the same way. Shannon says:

...the second disclaimers has another function. It is to make the people aware that liberation will come from God. God will send the deliverer. Thus they should not misinterpret his message of rebellion but an affirmation of deliverance through one whom God would choose; it is God who would decide the way in which liberation would take place.(p.113)

Why is this second disclaimer not interpreted in the same way as the first disclaimer? In light of Shannon's emphasis on correlation and confrontation as a part of these sources, it should not be out of line to project that the preacher may, in fact, have been advocating revolt, even in the midst of his disclaimers.

The themes identified in this book are critical for debunking the eurocentric hermeneutic and developing an afrocentric African American Biblical Hermeneutic. De-africanization of the Bible must continue to be reversed. The richness of African American imagination along with other dimensions of our reality must be legitimized. We must continue to empower the historically victimized to read with our/their own eyes and hear with our/their own ears, in order to develop the consistency needed for the continued task of liberation of the AfricanAmerican.

As with other afrocentric studies, we need to encourage and support African-American religious scholarship. Langston Hughes warns the Black intelligentsia that to deny who we are, to run



away from our own spirituality, to turn our backs on our race is to prevent any possibility of becoming great.<sup>3</sup>

As long as we continue to deny who we are, thus negating our unique perspectives and contributions to the intellectual world, we will never maximize our potentials. Is this not also the challenge for African American Religious Scholars? The process has begun; we have yet to see what the end will be.

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<sup>3</sup>Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in Addison Gayle Jr., *Black Aesthetics* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 167.